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The Press in Nigeria

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Abstract

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In the whole of Africa there were in 1976 only 190 daily newspapers having a total circulation of six million copies. This gives Africa an average of 14 copies per 1,000 inhabitants against a World average of 130 per 1,000 (Western Europe 243 per 1,000).[1]

From a Western point of view the quality of the press is determined by its independence, objectivity and its right to criticise authority. Most Westerners favour the principle of a free press. There is a great difference between a free press and the state-owned presses of the communist powers, which are often the mouthpieces of the government.

In the Third World we can distinguish crudely between three categories of newspapers.

1) Countries with reactionary or even fascist governments

where the press is censored so that any expression of liberal or socialist opposition is completely eradicated.

2) Countries with a more or less socialist policy where the government-controlled press is used for propaganda and educational purposes. In Tanzania for example the press serves a useful function in the development process.

3) Countries which take as their model Western liberal democracies. Even here, political freedom is restricted and often interrupted. The government declares a state of emergency or the military takes over, stating its intention to restore parliamentary rule in the not too distant future.

An American institute in 1978 tried to express the various nations' respect for political freedom by means of a 'Political Freedom Index'.[2] The result of course is highly questionable but may give a comparative evaluation from a rather extreme liberal point of view. With the exception of Senegal and Botswana the score for Nigeria was higher than for any other African nation. In a country under military rule, highly bureaucratic and rather corrupt, this may be partly explained by the planned transition to civil rule in 1979, partly by the comparative freedom of the Nigerian press.

Fighting increasing restrictions newspapers and periodicals in Nigeria have succeeded in maintaining a running debate on matters of public interest during the last fifty years, before and after independence in 1960. The press compares favourably with the press in most developing countries and is probably the freest press in Africa. In fact, in many ways it has taken the place of an opposition to the government.

Throughout colonial times in most of Africa newspapers were written for and read by the whites and supported colonial rule. Kenya has inherited from colonial times an entertaining, well-written press, which has however consistently supported the rulers, be they white or black. In colonial Nigeria there were few whites but in comparison with East Africa a large number of educated Africans. Weekly or fortnightly newspapers had existed in Lagos for about fifty years when, after the first World War,

criticism of colonial rule was reflected in the local press. Dominion status for Nigeria was mentioned as a possibility for the distant future. At that time this attitude was unheard of in most 'black' African colonies.

After his return from studying in the USA and a stay at the Gold Coast Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe in 1937 started the crusading nationalist newspaper *West African Pilot* in Lagos. In the following years he founded the 'Zik Group of Newspapers' in various towns in Nigeria. 'In view of the primitive system of transportation in the country ... I thought that a group of newspapers published at strategic centres would minimize the problems of distribution', Azikiwe writes in his memoirs.[3] Azikiwe put down 'Twelve Cardinal Rules' for his journalists, a mixture of ethical rules and practical advice well known to Western journalists: 'Be fair. We shall not suppress the truth for fear of hurting feelings or losing revenue. Be careful in crime reporting ... Get names right ... Beware of seekers after free publicity ... Beware of your own prejudices ... Don't offend races, tribes, nationalities, religions ... Don't promise to suppress any news story ... Keep your hands clean' etc. (p. 308). 'During my sixteen years service I was able to give theoretical and practical training in journalism to over sixty of the most eminent journalists and leaders of the country', he writes (p. 433). Azikiwe's interest was not confined to journalism alone but also to the many technical problems connected with newspaper production in a non-industrial society.

One of the main problems for Nigeria was that too many talented and educated young Nigerians made their career in the public or service sector as lawyers, politicians etc. whilst there was, and still is, a fatal lack of agriculturalists, engineers and industrialists. This was in fact what Azikiwe did turning from clever industrial manager to politician.

In the most populous nation of Africa torn by rivalries between regions, parties, traditional rulers, religious and ethnic groups and with increasing class-distinctions the journalists were now faced with the task of reporting public affairs objectively and

keeping democratic debate alive in a situation where many of the new politicians were men of the type described by Achebe in his novel *A Man of the People.* Nearly all the mainly private-owned newspapers soon clashed with the government. In 1961 the Federal Government founded its own newspapers *The Morning Post* and *Sunday Post* and in 1964 increased its control by passing The Newspaper Amendment Act which extended official control to the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation. In that year Nigeria also produced its first university graduates in journalism from a new college in Ibadan. Unfortunately many of the university-trained journalists proved typical careerists and found posts in the new, officially sponsored newspapers, radio and television stations. Yet in spite of this infusion of university graduates and financial grants the two state-owned papers could not compete with the privately owned presses and folded up their operations in 1976 with a circulation of less than 10,000 copies.

In the long run, however, state-ownership of the successful private press could not be avoided. The military came to power 1966 and declared a state of emergency, tightening the screws on the press. The partitioning of Nigeria into twelve states in 1967 and nineteen in 1976 creaed a wish for new state-governments to found their own state-controlled papers. When the Federal Government in 1976 acquired sixty per cent of the shares in the large Daily Times Group of newspapers the majority of the presses became state-owned. By that time *The Daily Times* sold at least 150,000 copies a day while the Sunday edition, *The Sunday Times*, had reached a circulation of 500,000 copies.[4] The situation of the press in the 1970s was aptly described by Alhaji Babatunde Jose, chairman of *The Daily Times*, in a speech given in 1972:

> Many well-meaning people have accused Nigerian journalists and newspapers of being dull, timid, spineless and mealy-mouthed. They say we cannot 'publish and be damned'. They forget that apart from the laws of defamation and sedition ... there are other formidable constraints on press freedom in Nigeria. Under the state of emergency all constitutional rights ceased to exist ... The armed forces rule by decrees. It has been made an offence to

publish any matter 'which by reason of dramatization or other defects in the manner of its presentation is likely to cause public alarm or industrial unrest'. In the absence of a democratically elected parliament the newspapers have found themselves playing the role of a deliberative assembly reflecting the feelings of the people, their pecadillos, their likes and dislikes of government policies and actions and the conduct of the people, who run the government. In consequence almost every editor of any important newspaper including those owned by governments has seen the inside of a police cell or army orderly room. The result is that journalists now have to impose self-censorship on what they write and in effect what they tell the public in news and views ... Of course in Nigeria as in other African countries journalists and newspapers have a responsibility to help in nation building and foster national unity.[5]

Jose's comment about editors seeing the inside of a police cell was not an exaggeration. In 1972, the news editor of *The Daily Times* was detained for a month after writing an article on a long-delayed selection of a new principle for Ibadan Polytechnic. The article was entitled 'Show of Power over Ibadan Polytechnic', and was accompanied by a photograph of Brigadier Rotomi, the Western State Governor.[6]

Thousands of critical articles, however, have been published without any consequences as long as the journalists avoided attacking certain important persons, and there have been few, if any, instances of direct censorship before publishing. On the whole the press has been more fortunate than that of most other countries under military dictatorship. In many ways the Federal Commissioner for Information was right when he said during a special press briefing in Lagos 9 May 1978 that the Government had not introduced press censorship and did not intend to do so. The danger in 1979 seems to be that the Constitutional Drafting Committee preparing transition to civil rule has made provisions for an Executive President wielding enormous power with probably inadequate guarantees for the unfettered functioning of the press.

Nigeria of the 1970s has developed into a nation dominated by 'the frantic grab of the few well-placed for easy wealth'.[7] In a

series of articles the press has emphasized that the Government, because of the present oil-wealth, has been a victim of the 'illusion of affluence' and has lavishly spread this affluence through the wrong channels, not doing enough to stimulate agriculture, infrastructure and education. The press has repeatedly advised the Government to 'recall people from the shopping spree' and to ban the increasing import of luxury goods. The question 'Is Oil a Blessing or a Curse?' has been raised in large headlines, and the curse aspect has been emphasized. Thus *The Nigerian Business Times* wrote (29 March 1977):

> The fact remains that in spite of the so-called oil boom and the rapid growth of the Gross Domestic Product, per capita income in Nigeria is still lower than in many other countries in West Africa. What this calls for is a recognition by everyone that the good fortune from oil, which is a wasting asset, is an opportunity to improve the well-being of the entire population on a more permanent basis and not a surplus to be squandered by the few who are in a position to do so.

This shows the concern of a responsible press for the underprivileged majority and how close it goes to the bone in its criticism of the privileged few in Nigeria. The latter group are formidable enemies but the Nigerian press shows no sign of weakening. In a statement in *The Daily Times*, 28 April 1978 it emphasized it would continue to fight:

> Whatever kind of junta would rule the nation after 1979, be that government military or civilian, elected or unelected, parliamental or presidential, the press shall assert its right to freedom.

NOTES:

1. UNESCO Statistical Yearbook 1976.
2. *Time*, 13 March 1978, pp. 14-15.
3. Nnamdi Azikiwe, *My Odyssey* (London, 1970), p. 301. Further references will be to this edition and will be included in the text.

4. *Africa* No 85, September 1978, p. 78.
5. *Africa Contemporary Record* 1972-73, p. C 181.
6. ibid, p. B 698.
7. Richard A. Josephs, 'Affluence and Underdevelopment: The Nigerian Experience' in *Journal of Modern African Studies* 1978, No 2, p. 238.